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Identity VS E-identity

Katarina Kuruc

Recently, I read an interesting article by Anthony Smith (1986), entitled “Technology, Identity and the Information Machine”. Although slightly outdated (it was published in 1986), I found it strikingly applicable to contemporary discussions regarding social media and communication technologies. In his first line Smith writes, “It is as if human kind is being forcibly inscribed into one history, a history that is being re-written both forwards and backwards, mediated, symbolized and memorized by the computer, the information machine *par excellence*” (pp. 155-156). The sentiment is striking in its current applicability. This particular notion made me think, not only of the re-writing of history, but also about the creation and formation of our own identities in today’s technological society, or what Barney (2004) refers to as the *Network Society*. Michel Foucault (1998) claims that human beings have, since the beginning, sought to understand and define their identities “by ascribing them either to nature, human effort or God” (pp.256). In semiotics, the human consciousness is what makes the “self.” Identity is, therefore defined as the “awareness of one’s environment and one’s existence, sensations and thoughts” (Danesi, 1998, p. 253). Subsequently, theorists of semiotics assert that our identity is 3-dimensional, in that it is shaped by “bodily, representational, and cultural factors and influences” (Danesi, 1998, p. 253). If we are to use this definition of identity and human consciousness, then I propose that in our current technologically-mediated environment there is in fact a fourth dimension that needs to be taken into consideration which plays an equally vital role in shaping our identity: that of technology.

Smith goes on to assert that “there is no doubt that all of our knowledge begins with experience” (pp.156). What then, I ask myself, happens when that experience takes place outside the realm of traditional reality and shifts virtually into cyber-space? Does our identity become free-floating? In other words, because experience relies on our senses and perceptions, when our experiences become mediated what happens to the process of identity creation? Smith claims that in a technological society, the whole environment shifts as technology “imposes a second layer on the process of perception (...) it occurs in a dual environment” (Smith, 1986, p. 166). Consider Smith’s analogy of driving a car: the reality that is experienced in the car is mediated by what is seen through the windshield (p. 166). Now imagine experiencing the entire world through the windshield of the car. This alters the perception of one’s



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environment by adding another element through which reality is perceived. In another sense, through technology individuals become spectators, not participants in experiences. With this in mind, it is my assertion that when our experiences are mediated through technology, specifically social media, there is a shift away from the construction of “identity” to the establishment of an “E-dentity,” one that is free-floating and essentially not founded in reality. In this essay I focus on three different ways through which this occurs: First, by becoming elements within a network, we lose an aspect of our autonomous individuality and become free-floating “nodes” (to use Barney’s concept). In this case, anyone has the ability to inscribe meaning both to themselves as well as to others. Second, there is a shift away from an experience-based construction of identity to one that is highly conceptualized through a projected image of oneself. Finally, I come back to Smith’s notion of a “second layer” of reality, where individuals no longer construct their identities in the “real world” but project them into a virtual network, where identities are lost among all the other network nodes.

In *The Network Society* (2004), Barney suggests that the spirit of our generation is the spirit of the network, which constitutes “a new social morphology of our societies” (pp. 2). Essentially, the network re-shapes how individuals interact and ascribe each other and themselves, meanings. For example, as participants in the network, we are no longer autonomous individuals who shape our own identities through experience but rather we become ‘nodes’ that form society. In turn, the network then influences the meanings of the identities which are part of the collective. Barney furthers his point by claiming that the network acts as a “womb” from which a “new form of society is being born” one where “identity, politics, and economy are structured, and operate as networks” (pp. 2). To understand the concept of a network-based identity let’s take a popular example of social media. I am sure many of us, are part of the Facebook network. Within this particular on-line system we can think of ourselves as little nodes that make up the entirety of the Facebook collective. Once part of this network, all the other nodes participating within it have the ability to ascribe meaning and characteristics to others’ personal identity in various ways (wall posts, photos, notes, quizzes etc.). The identity that is created through such means is not static, but rather it is dynamic because nodes are being constantly added and modified. All of this contributes to the construction of the network identity. In this case our respective “selves” have been structured as part of the collective as opposed to the individual experience. Consequently, there is a shift away from an influence of nature, God or human effort on our identity. Rather, the central influence on shaping identity becomes an artificial, technological (in this case, online) network. Smith remarks that within a technological society one’s identity becomes “subject to a set of complicated and meditated relationships, mediated by the text and those who hold and organize the text” (pp. 160). As

a result “there is no ultimate perceptual security, no ultimate validation of a text back to an original authority” (pp. 162). In essence, by becoming part of a network one relinquishes the power of self-authorship. Through social media tools such as Facebook, the individual no longer has complete control over the shaping of the “self” because there exist countless forces that shape one’s identity—an identity that is, for all intense purposes, not real.

My second point derives from an undergraduate lecture I recently attended that dealt with the idea of the image. Although the topic dealt primarily with Political Image construction, I couldn’t help but draw parallels between image creation and identity production. What is an image? According to communication theorist, John Hartley (2002) an image is “the objectification of self-knowledge for communicative purposes” (pp. 107). Furthermore, at the “individual level, one’s “image” is made up of cues by which others make sense of the performance of the self” (pp. 107). In other words, it is a kind of façade that individuals create in order to present themselves to the world. Daniel Boorstin (1992) claims that images are synthetic, believable, passive, vivid and concrete, simplified and ambiguous. For the purpose of this essay, however, I will only concentrate on two of these aspects: synthetic and ambiguous. An image is synthetic because it is a self-made construction, embodying what one chooses to project onto the world, as opposed to a natural manifestation of an individual. When one creates an identity online, for example, it is never natural because it is always mediated by a secondary element (technology, computer program etc.). Therefore, the image that is created is synthetic. However, this constructed image is not necessarily a lie. Rather, as Boorstin suggests, it has an ambiguous relationship with reality. Again, let’s take the example of Facebook. When one conveys an image of themselves on Facebook, that image is not a lie per se, however the relationship between that image and the real “self” is uncertain. This is because there is nothing concrete to substantiate the truth of the image, aside from the image itself. In everyday experiences, an image is secondary to identity, it can be authenticated through interaction but it can also be invalidated. With an online image-based identity, this is much harder to accomplish because the image is all that is being revealed. This signifies a shift away from an experience-based manifestation of identity to a solely image-based one, which occurs in the realm of cyberspace. Smith argues that once we move away from an experience-based identity to a digitally mediated and image-based one, there occurs a “kind of paradigm shift (...) from the objective to the relative—from certainty through representation of knowledge as objective to a different kind of certainty derived through a satisfying interpretation of varying versions of information” (pp. 162). Due to the fact that our projected, tech-mediated online identity has an element of ambiguity, it is from this ambiguity that meanings are derived. Meanings that anyone who is part of the network can ascribe, negotiate and interpret. Once again, one loses a kind of

authorship over his/her own identity, and knowledge of the “self” no longer becomes shaped by the three semiotic dimensions, rather there is a fourth force acting on the construction of the “self”: technology.

The third, and final point, relates back to Smith’s notion of the dual layer of reality. In the beginning I mentioned the analogy of seeing the world through the windshield of a car. In this example, it is evident that there is a break in the link between the reality of experience and the self. If we experience reality through the car windshield, we are no longer active participants of reality, but rather we become spectators. We view what is around us, interpret our environment, but we do not actively engage with it. In the network society the metaphor of the windshield can easily be replaced with a computer screen or a computer program. A good, albeit extreme, example of this is an online program called *Second Life* (<http://secondlife.com>). In this virtual community one has the ability, and is encouraged, to construct an entire world that includes careers, relationships (friendly, romantic and sexual), entire lives etc. In this case, *Second Life* is more than an online game—it is a whole new and different kind of reality; one in which entire personalities can be constructed and entire lives can be lived. I realize that programs such as *Second Life* are extreme versions of mediated identity creation, where the concept of an experience-based reality is effectively erased. Given that the majority of the population within the network society would probably not engage in these radical programs, it is safe to say that our everyday technology also plays a significant role in creating a similar ‘second-layer’ of reality. Technologies such as mobile phones, Blackberries and I-phones, as well as online communities such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter all contribute an extra layer to our engagement with everyday experiences. Participants text about their encounters rather than partake in them with other participants. People “meet” other people online to connect for relationships, friendships and even sexual encounters, sometimes without ever having direct face-to-face communication. A good example of this is Twitter or the Facebook status bar where members allow others to know what they are doing at a particular time without having any direct contact with those who “tune in”—a kind of “e-voyeurism.” Although these mediated practices are not experience-based, many participants still consider themselves to be part of something personal, a community. A community which in turn, allows individuals to create their own identities, or-“E-dentites”. Smith acknowledges this aspect as a growing myth of the technological society. Drawing on Gadamer’s concept of an “artificial counter reality,” he claims that it is a myth to think that through technology the human world will somehow grow into a single community or a substitute for a community” (pp. 166). I find a sense of irony in the fact that Smith wrote this essay in the 1980’s when the concept of social media was only a theory. After reading Smith’s article I cannot help but feel that now, more than two decades after his paper was written, Smith was most definitely onto something.

I would like to end with a final thought. Archeologists theorize that human-made objects are extensions of ourselves and this is why it is possible to “reconstruct ancient cultures on the basis of the artifacts they (archeologists) discover” (Danesi, 1998, p. 260). My question then is this: If the above is correct and tools are an extension of the “self,” which help to shape our experiences, perceptions and understanding of our identities, society and culture; then as participants in the network society I wonder if this relationship has been inverted, and we have in fact become extensions of our technologies?

Author

Katarina Kuruc is a PhD candidate at Carleton University in the Communications department. Her research interests focus on cultural theory, development of Eastern Europe, non-verbal communication, visual culture, material culture, popculture, fashion theory and visual representation.

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